

Mid-length Draft of LA Times Opinion Section essay for July 3, 2005

It was with a sense of familiarity, but not nostalgia, that I heard President Bush explain on June 28 why we must stay the course in Iraq, for as long as it takes. I had heard virtually all of his themes before, almost word for word, in speeches delivered by three presidents I had worked for: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Not with pride, I recognized that I had proposed some of those very words myself.

That shouldn't have surprised me. In July of 1965, drafting a speech on Vietnam for Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, I had the same task as Bush's speechwriters in June 2005: how to rationalize and motivate continued public support for a hopelessly stalemated, unnecessary war our president had lied us into.

Looking back on my draft, I find I used the word "terrorist" about our adversaries even more than Bush did in this particular speech. Like Bush's advisors, too, I felt the need at that juncture for a global threat to explain the scale of effort we were embarking on; for that role, I felt "China" was better suited as our "real" adversary than Ho Chi Minh, just as Bush now prefers to focus on Al Qaeda as our enemy in Iraq rather than Iraqi nationalists. [[Bush June 28: They are trying to shake our will in Iraq—just as they [sic] tried to shake our will on Sept. 11, 2001."]

This particular speech was not delivered then—although my draft, including all the words below, had been approved for delivery, not only by McNamara but by McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk-- because it was a clarion call for mobilizing the reserves to support an open-ended escalation of troops. (The counterpart now would be to reinstitute the draft). President Johnson chose instead at that time to make his own, rather off-hand, statement at a press conference, because he wanted to conceal, and lie about, what his military advisors were really telling him was necessary to succeed.ⁱ

But the note that was particularly reminiscent to me in Bush's speech Tuesday was what the New York Times described as "a call for stoicism and endurance, during what Mr. Bush termed, for the second time in a week, 'a time of testing.'" "We have more work to do, and there will be tough moments that test America's resolve...they are trying to shake our will in Iraq—just as they [sic] tried to shake our will on Sept. 11, 2001."

This theme recalled for me the almost identical climactic challenge of my 1965 draft, a passage that, for reasons that will be evident, I have never chosen to reproduce before. (This particular speech was not used--though my draft, including the words below, had been approved for delivery by McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk—but the same sentiments turned up in many other speeches by U.S. officials over the next seven or eight years).

"*We are being tested.*" I wrote. "In blunt terms: have we the guts, the grit, the determination to stick with a frustrating, bloody, difficult course as long as it takes to see

it through without getting bored or despairing, without losing sight of all our objectives, without being lured by false promises of short-cuts? The Asian Communists [note to White House speechwriters—to use this in years ahead, substitute, Al Qaeda, or later, Iran, or still later, China again] are sure that we have not.”

“The only question is how long it will take. Two years? Three years? How long will it be, they ask their listeners sardonically, before the U.S. tires of its wearisome task, how long will it maintain the efforts it has pledged?” [Bush, June 28: our adversaries “believe that free societies are essentially corrupt and decadent, and with a few hard blows they can force us to retreat.”]

Bush’s speechwriters, like me, had then to address this question from the other side. “How long must the American public, to meet this particular test of resolve, support American troops as they kill and die in Iraq?” They provided him on Tuesday the same workmanlike evasions that served recurrently Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon : “...as long as it takes ...until the fight is won...”

I no longer commend my own proposed response of 1965-- “There is only one answer for us to give”—which drew on a famous riposte by Adlai Stevenson during the Cuban Missile Crisis:

“Till hell freezes over.”

Ah, me. When I published a collection of my official writings in Papers on the War in 1972—while I was on trial for releasing the Pentagon Papers—I didn’t include this effort. As I wrote then, I wasn’t presenting everything I’d done or written as an official, not being a masochist; the limitations of my best things, the ones I cited, were clear enough. In 1972 the Vietnam war, my “test” of American patience, was still going on.